

# HOW TO PREP, PLANT, AND CARE FOR ORNAMENTAL GARDEN BEDS THAT DELIGHT FOR YEARS

*Jennifer Thompson*

Creating an ornamental garden bed is limited only by one's ingenuity. For this article, we are going to look at a simple, step-by-step process and use an ornamental bed project my husband and I completed as an example.

## Fall

Why begin a project in the fall and not in the spring? There are critical (to future happiness and sanity!) steps to take now.

First consider bed size, location, and other.

• **What are you trying to do?** Do you want to soften the edges of a house or other building? (You may not want trees, shrubs, or much water near a house foundation.) Do you want to be able to see your garden from certain house windows, or is it more for visitors or passersby?

• **Maintenance.** A bed closer to the house might be easier to maintain (closer to water source or handier to weed and to use an electric weedwhacker around the edges). Siting a bed closer to the house might also make it slightly easier to deter vegetation munchers (deer, antelope,

rabbits); however, nothing beats fencing if there are wildlife issues.

• **How big?** How much area do you want to maintain? If gardening is not a favorite activity, perhaps a small garden or shrubbery is best. The example beds in the pictures consume an area WAY TOO BIG for most folks to reasonably tackle in one year. The landscaping also contains way too many types of plants for most people. Tackle large projects in chunks – such as one bed per year.





*Grass and weeds have been killed. We're about ready to plant!*



*Garden hoses can help you plan your paths and bed edges.*

Once location and size are decided, get out the garden hoses. I like to use natural curves for the edges on my beds. I like the way they look, and lawn mowers tend to maneuver around them more easily. Lay the garden hoses on the ground to create the edge of the bed. Twiddle with them until you are happy with the look; however, if only straight lines are preferred, then put in straight lines. Mark the edges with stakes or whatever you won't stumble over or accidentally run the mower over.

Make some quick sketches of the area and add measurements to the sketch, including measurements for potential paths; this will help with planning. I wanted a path in my new beds in part because of their larger size. I wanted the paths to be rambly, not straight, so I used those handy garden hoses to outline the paths and take measurements.

Pictures of the area, complete with hoses, will also help planning the plants you'd like in the bed. This planning is particularly therapeutic in January or February – bye-bye cabin fever, for a couple of hours anyway.

Get a soil test – especially if plants have never been planted in

this area or there is reason to suspect problems. Contact a local UW Extension office for instructions on how to do this and for available testing lab information. The information will determine if the soil needs amended (adding compost or other soil additions). Do any amending before planting.

Now tackle a very important aspect of this kind of project – weed control! Early fall is a very good time to kill some of the nastier perennial weeds, such as Canada thistle and whitetop. They will be back if not taken care of before planting and sometimes even nastier than before, especially if the area is rototilled. One plant now may be 20 plants next spring – and they will be mixed among garden plants, making control more difficult.

For lots more information on landscaping topics (including plants suited to Wyoming conditions) visit our "Landscaping" page at [barnyardsandbackyards.com](http://barnyardsandbackyards.com)

Talk to a local weed and pest control district or UW Extension office about control strategies for particular weeds. If possible, treat them in fall, and then re-treat if needed in spring. Pay careful attention to residual information on herbicide labels before application. Don't waste time and money by having residual herbicides kill your landscape plants.

## **Winter**

Winter is for planning and ordering supplies.

I drew my plans for the beds on a piece of graph paper so I could accurately space plants and considered what plants I wanted. You can create this plan however you choose; the main point is to give it a little thought. I considered how tall the plants were, how wide, flower color and bloom time, and how much water they preferred. You may also want to consider what may be available at a local or mail order nursery.

Using the measurements I made in the fall, I ordered rock for the paths from a local supplier, to be delivered at a later date. After many years spent pulling out what seemed like the same dang grass plants over and



*Installing the edging.*



*Working on the stone path.*

over again because they repeatedly snuck under a project's edging, I knew I wanted heavy-duty, very deep edging for the flower bed borders. This wasn't available locally, so I ordered from a landscape supplier.

### **Spring**

Spring arrives! I grew plants indoors under florescent lights during the early spring and also bought some later. Buy from a nursery or plant catalog if you have neither the time nor interest to grow them.

Consider how you will water the plants. Decide now if you want to install an irrigation system, and plan accordingly if you do.

Didn't get around to weed control in the fall? Hop on it! Kill any weeds that survived if you sprayed in the fall. Kill the grass. I do this by spraying green and growing grass with glyphosate (Roundup or other similar products) and waiting two weeks (with high enough daily temperatures) to make sure the roots are dead.

If grass was there before, you now have a nice dead-grass outline of the bed. Remove any stakes or other markers. My husband used a heavy-duty rototiller attached to a tractor to



*Plants have been placed where they will be planted.*

till the area and make planting easy. I have created many a bed, however, by digging it up by hand with a soil fork.

Now is the time to amend the soil if needed.

Lay plastic edging in the sun to soften it up, so working with it will become less like wrestling an octopus. Follow directions for installation. In this case, we dug a trench and installed it. As with many DIY projects, things did not go exactly as planned.



*Topping it off – mulching the beds.*



*Early July 2015 –This new bed starts to show its stuff as summer kicks in.*

The edging did not arrive in time, so we planted plants first and then installed the edging.

Install any paths (or do this before edging if you prefer and the design allows). Once again, we did things out of order and installed the paths after the plants! This was a simple process of selecting a rock, putting it where we thought it looked nice, and proceeding.

The best days to transplant are cloudy, overcast, coolish, and windless. This creates less stress for the plants until their roots get settled in and start pulling in water efficiently so they don't wilt. A kind friend and her kids (thank you Amy, Eliza, and Sam!) helped me tackle planting. I placed the plants where I thought they belonged, then we all planted away. (Refer back to the winter plan and improvise as needed.)

Good luck getting a stretch of ideal weather for your project! If you don't have a stretch of ideal weather, rig some protection for the plants for a week or so, and they will thank you. Gradually expose them to more sunlight and wind. Water thoroughly! All plants, even drought-tolerant ones, need some babying at first to get settled in. No water equals dead plants and a waste of money.

Mulch! Water conservation and weed suppression are my main goals with mulching. Looking nice is good as well! In our case, we got pickup loads of pine pole peelings from a local wood processor. Inexpensive, and it works fine. The pine pole peelings mat together a bit, which makes it a little harder to get water down to the plant roots, but it also means they don't blow as much. We live in

an area that is a wind tunnel in winter and a good chunk of spring and fall as well. Place the mulch in a big basket or wheelbarrow and dump where needed. Spread uniformly between plants.

Depending on how your house is constructed and local fire issues, you may want to choose a different type of mulch (such as rock) or incorporate additional firebreak features into the landscape.

### **Summer and Ever After**

Continue to water regularly. Weed, weed, weed! Don't let weeds go to seed! (Eventually there will be less of this.) Enjoy your handiwork, maintain your ornamental garden bed throughout the years, and watch it grow and mature into an ever-changing spot of beauty in your life.

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